

**2003 Midwest Research to Practice Conference in
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**Non-Ethnic Minority Acceptance in Adult Education:
Practice, Praxis, or Still Just Theory**

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Abstract: This paper offers the reader an opportunity to better understand the dynamics that occur in adult education classrooms and workshops when sexual orientation is integrated into the subject matter. This issue relates to how learning about sexual orientation can create new knowledge about ourselves, about our differences, about our humanity, and how learning is either created or suppressed in the field of adult education. The paper examines four concerns in relation to sexual orientation: The degree of emotional and physical safety for the gay adult learner in the classroom, the impact of homophobia on both the gay and heterosexual learner and instructor, the freedom and support accorded the adult educator to practice from the reality of their sexual orientation, and the efforts being made by the adult education field to search out and utilize the resources available on this subject-both theoretical and practical.

Introduction

Perceptions about non-ethnic minorities, specifically those from a gay or lesbian orientation, have altered and taken on added importance within the adult education community during the last few years. This appears to be partly due to the growing visibility of the gay adult learner in our society and the issues surrounding them as they strive, as many have before them, for emancipation and empowerment in an institutionalized social structure that is still predominantly hegemonic in nature. But, have we as a field and as individual adult educators, really integrated empowerment theories, like those outlined by Cass (1948) and D'Augelli (1994), into our curriculums or are we still maintaining an attitude of "kindly" tolerance toward the LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and trans-gender) learner in our classrooms and workshops thereby continuing to operate from the dual roles of both emancipator and oppressor (Hill, 1995)?

The main purpose of this paper will be to take a closer look at the actuality of integrating non-ethnic minority issues, in a positive and empowering way, into adult education classrooms so that the opportunity for gay discourse and resistance education leading to the reconstruction of knowledge is being utilized resulting in powerful identity transformations for all involved (Van Genep, 1969).

To accomplish this purpose, questions about our commitment and dedication to total diversity need to be raised and answered and the numerous concerns surrounding this issue need to be addressed, post-structurally, within the context of adult education planning and practice. These concerns include providing a safe learning environment, both physically and emotionally, for the adult learner who is LGBT and the impact that homophobia is having on both the learners and the instructor in adult education environments and whether or not that impact is being addressed. The gay adult educator's freedom to practice from the reality of their sexual

orientation or his or her ignominy of being forced to continue to hide in the closets of adult education departments and university administrations. Finally, the degree of effort being made by adult education to utilize the LGBT resources available to colleges and universities in every major city in this country that would better enable heterocentric discourse to be counteracted and the theories outlined by Cass (1984) and D'Augelli (1994) to be more fully integrated into adult education curriculums.

Discussion

As a field, we have embraced the mission of fulfilling the educational needs of those that have been disenfranchised and marginalized, because of the hegemonic force that impacts us all, as well as the population norm. We have made tremendous progress in helping ethnic minorities of all types to become more fully integrated into a pluralistic society, and along the way, have been responsible teaching for adults the ethos of compassion, empathy, and tolerance for those different from themselves. But, have we embraced, with the same fervor, the fulfillment of the needs of non-ethnic minorities or have we held back, waiting instead to see how societal winds are blowing and how safe it is for boat rocking in our classrooms and administrative departments?

While some inroads have been made toward the inclusion of the LGBT population within the adult education framework, it is far from the degree of acceptance afforded other minorities. This is partly due to the institutional framework that adult education operates in and the level of homophobia that still permeates institutionalized perceptions and ways of thinking and relating to this important population we are committed to serve. But, part of the responsibility must also be accepted by the adult education field itself.

In 1995 Robert Hill, Assistant Professor of Adult Education at The University of Georgia conducted a critical review of the amount of gay discourse that existed in adult education literature. The results were less than impressive. Of the thousands of journal articles accessed, barely a handful dealt with gay orientation issues and of those that did, all were authored by openly gay educators (Hill, 1995).

From the beginning, part of the fundamental mission of adult education has been to promote the social good by using education as a social action motivating tool. No matter what the content of the education delivered, inherent in that delivery is the idea that we are not just delivering product, we are changing human beings for the better and helping to bring about a more just and tolerant society. As Wilson and Hayes (2000) state:

We also believe that adult and continuing education is also essentially a human endeavor, a social practice of human interaction that depends significantly upon its practitioners' assumptions, values, and experiences to shape practical actions, actions themselves that are profoundly affected by the larger socio-cultural-economic-political conditions in which they take place. (p. 17)

Many of our assumptions, values, and experiences as adult educators and learners, with regard to sexual orientation and the gay community, have been shaped by an institutionalized hegemonic force in our society that marginalizes the gay learner through the use of heterocentrism in discourse, the emotional rationalization of heterosexism, and the subsequent homophobic behaviors that they engender.

How can we, as adult educators, change this belief system that negatively impacts both the gay and the heterosexual adult learner? We can start by examining some of the causes that perpetuate the exclusionary and discriminatory practices that promote socialization to stereotype that can engender feelings of inadequacy and inferiority resulting in the lowering of aspirations for this marginalized adult learner population (Hayes & Colin, 1994). We can start by looking more in depth at some of the “roadblocks” that inhibit theoretical discourse of this issue from becoming practice in our classrooms and workshops.

Providing a Safe Environment for the Gay Adult Learner

Imagine, if you will, that this is the early 1960s, that you are African-American, and that you are attending college in the Deep South and that your classmates are white. They are also blind. The only way they can discern whether or not someone is of the same color is by listening to the inflections in others voices, that is, listening for certain “cues” to tell them if the person belongs to their group or is “colored.” That’s what it feels like for the “average” gay person sitting in a college classroom or working in a university department. As long as they know how to “talk the talk” they can “pass” and are relatively safe from attack. God help them if they are part of the small percentage of gay people who do exhibit, for whatever reason, some of the stereotypical “inflections” in their behaviors. They are even more in harm’s way.

As a gay student myself, the first thing I do upon entering a new classroom is to scout it out. I look to see what the demeanor of the other students is like. I observe the educator, listening for cues that will tell me whether or not he or she is homophobic or open to diversity and if they are open-minded, whether or not they will set a tone for the class that states discrimination, in any form, will not be tolerated in their classroom. Only then do I feel it is safe enough to learn from the reality of who I am.

Is this little analogy and my own personal perceptions of the learning environment justified? While campus climates may vary, few present a welcoming environment for lesbian, gay and bisexual students. Homophobia among heterosexual college student is well documented (Astin, 1993; D’Augelli & Rose, 1990). The range of problematic campus circumstances faced by lesbians and gay men is illustrated by several studies conducted at a large state university (see D’Augelli, 1989, for a description of the university and its community). One study (D’Augelli, 1992) reports on openly gay and lesbian undergraduate students who were asked about their experiences with discrimination and violence. The results showed that:

1. 75% had experienced verbal harassment.
2. 25% had been threatened with physical violence at least once; 22% were chased or followed; 5% were spit upon.
3. 17% had property damaged.
4. Gay men were more frequently the objects of verbal insults and threats of violence.
5. Nearly all expected the “average” lesbian or gay man to be harassed on campus.
6. Most hid their sexual orientation from roommates and other students.
7. Nearly half made specific life changes to avoid harassment.
8. 64% feared for their personal safety on campus. This fear was associated with having been threatened or verbally abused, having had property destroyed, or having been chased.

More recent studies, like that of the Kaiser Foundation (2001), support the idea that little has changed. The study found that 74% of gay men and lesbians surveyed still reported being

the target of verbal abuse and that 32% of gay men and women reported experiencing physical abuse or damage to their property.

These studies, and many more systemic surveys, present only a partial picture of the campus climate experienced by LGBT students because the studies focus only on actual victimization. Managing sexual identity also involves active avoidance of threatening situations and people (Evans & D'Augelli, 1996). These results, unfortunately, still point to the necessity for the gay learner having to ascertain the climate of the learning environment: the views of students, faculty, staff (I once walked by a cleaning crew on campus that was joking about how they should get the "fags" to clean up gum that was on the pavement because they were "so good with their mouths anyway"), and opinion leaders, especially the administration. How peers react to homophobic jokes, how faculty and staff handle verbal harassment, and how administration responds to acts of homophobic violence are crucial to determining the extent a gay person can and should be open about their orientation. Think of all the energy this takes away from the learning process for the gay adult learner and the impact it has on their identity development. We have to do better than this to provide true equal opportunity for all students.

Homophobia's Impact on Learning in Adult Education

Homophobia is a wall. A wall built brick by brick out of ignorance, fear, and prejudice. It is a wall that is cemented with heterocentric attitudes and cured in the kiln of societal hegemonic force. Like all walls, it divides one thing from another, one person from another, and prevents unity from taking place. It encircles the person trapped in it, inhibiting new ideas and feelings from coming in and stemming new ideas and feelings from getting out. It does not belong in adult education classrooms, workshops, or departments. And the only way of eliminating it is to either smash it or deconstruct it, brick by brick.

Technically, homophobia is the strong dread or irrational fear of homosexuals. This phobia is culturally and socially conditioned, reinforced and is exhibited in a society or by an individual through external or internal negative behaviors and/perceptions (Herek, 1986; MacDonald, 1976). There appears to be a symbiotic relationship between homophobia and prejudice. Though they are not the same negative expression, homophobia can stem from prejudice and vice versa. There are two components to homophobia: externalized and internalized homophobia. The externalized form is manifested through either aggressive or passive-aggressive behavior toward same-sex oriented individuals, groups, and toward heterosexual non-conforming social behaviors via cultural restraints. Internalized homophobia is the internalization of negative social attitudes towards gay people and/or self-loathing of one's own sexual attraction toward members of the same sex.

Adult educators and learners bring these concepts, concepts that are conditioned into us from early childhood, into our classrooms. Then, as part of the curriculum, we talk about diversity, social justice, and the need for transformational learning. But, how much energy do we expend when it comes to discourse on sexual orientation? How much opportunity is provided in classrooms to really deconstruct and unlearn heterosexist constructs?

Powell (2003) points out that historically and socially speaking, four of the most powerful distinctions that people have used to label, separate, and hurt one another are race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Of these distinctions, the latter is perhaps the most widely misunderstood and the one that is least likely to be talked about in public.

We need to break the silence and move the invisible to the visible in adult education so that adult learners and educators can become more fully aware of their own prejudice in the area

of sexual orientation and begin to see how it affects everybody, whether homosexual or heterosexual. Homophobia does affect the heterosexual community as well. It determines what kind of clothes that can be worn, the kinds of occupations that heterosexuals, especially males, can be employed in. It regulates the kind of social activities a straight person can enjoy (If you happen to like art instead of football, you're out of luck). It proscribes who you can have as friends—you aren't allowed to have gay friends because you might be associated as being gay as well. It even determines how you can walk and talk and the type of body language that can be expressed, especially if you're a male. It costs companies, political parties, and institutions money and the intellectual power from the brain trust embedded within the gay community, and sadly, it is part of the reason that males in large numbers are still less likely to choose careers (like teaching) that emphasize caring and nurturing (Powell, 2003).

What are some of the solutions that adult education can employ to extinguish homophobia in our field? We can start by providing enough information about what homosexuality really is based on facts rather than folklore. We can provide the opportunity to employ critical thinking in the areas of sexuality that will help enable adult learners to change their belief systems. And, as with any phobia treatment, we can provide desensitization to the stimulus, e.g. bringing in gay speakers, supporting attendance at workshops, etc. to help extinguish this conditioned illogical response.

The Freedom of Adult Educators to Practice from the Reality of Their Sexual Orientation

One of the appeals of working in the adult education field is the opportunity to discuss and explore personal and social issues, helping students to think in a critical and diverse manner. Many psychologists agree that allowing time in the classroom for discussion of diversity issues and the development of specialized courses on diversity are important (Simoni, Sexton-Radek, Yescavage, Richard, & Lundquist, 1999). But, as stated previously, the topic of sexual diversity is discussed neither often enough nor in enough depth compared to other diversity topics. This lack of open discussion about sexual diversity helps contribute to discrimination against sexual minorities on college campuses (Evans, & D'Augelli, 1996). These minorities are not all students and adult learners. Some of them are adult educators working in "secret" within adult education departments—secretly because they don't feel safe enough to practice their profession from the reality of who they are without repercussions from their peers, department heads, and the institutions that employ them.

I, myself, personally know of at least a dozen professors at Cleveland State, working in a variety of disciplines, that are gay or lesbian and still feel compelled to hide their sexual orientation out of fear of what "exposure" would cost them. Out of the twelve, only one, within the last couple of years, has made the decision to "come out" to his peers and the students in his classrooms. This openness, I believe, was due to his courage, the fact that he is head of his department and has had tenure for many years, and the fact that he is approaching the end of his teaching career with little to lose compared to what he's gained by taking this huge step.

My God, this is the year 2003, and we teach diversity and acceptance of others different from ourselves in our classrooms, yet continue to operate, knowingly or unknowingly, from a cycle of oppression framework from within our own field. Studies conducted by the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (2003) have indicated that as many as two out of every ten educators are gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual. Two out of ten! Can we really justify our commitment to diversity when so many in our field still feel the need to hide in closets?

Conclusion

Both as a field and as individual adult educators, we need to become more attuned to the degree of marginalization that LGBT adults still struggle with even in this time of diversity. This includes adult educators as well as adult learners. We need to search out and better utilize the sexual orientation resources available, bringing them into our classrooms in a more personal and human way so that it becomes people teaching people, not just theory teaching people. When all is said and done, that is the way we really learn about each other, our differences, and most of all, about ourselves.

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